



Knowing he'd been lucky beyond measure to draw two coveted tags in one year, he wasn't going to let a little bad luck get in the way of filling them both. **By Todd Wilkinson**

Pastor Steve Sturgeon is known for delivering colorful, inspiring sermons to his parishioners at Dillon Baptist Church in southwestern Montana. Over a span of three decades, he has often regaled his congregation with stories about believers who confronted adversity and kept the faith.

Late in 2013, after Montana's big game hunting season ended, Sturgeon shared a riveting homily that left listeners rapt in the pews. The harrowing tale, based on real-life events, happened to involve the minister-sportsman himself.

The story began the previous summer, when Sturgeon received a letter from Fish, Wildlife & Parks. "I thought, 'Hmmm, this envelope doesn't look like the kind they typically send saying you didn't get the big game tags you put in for,'" says Sturgeon. "I opened it up and discovered I had drawn a goat permit. Good grief—I couldn't believe it! What an exciting bit of news after 31 years of trying to get a goat tag. Sometimes, you just have to have faith."

Understandably joyous, Sturgeon continued flipping through his stack of mail and

Todd Wilkinson is a conservation journalist and publisher of the online magazine Wildlife Art Journal. He lives in Bozeman.

found another envelope from FWP, similar to the first. "I couldn't believe it. This one informed me I had received a permit to harvest a bighorn sheep!" he says.

Sturgeon's excitement, however, eventually turned to suspicion: "I thought, wait a minute, is somebody trying to be funny and playing a prank on me, knowing how much I love to hunt?"

It was no joke: Against astronomically long odds, the pastor had drawn both a Montana mountain goat tag and bighorn sheep tag in the same year.

Figuring he couldn't do both hunts justice if he tried to fill the two tags the same season, he called FWP in Helena and asked if he could use one tag that year and the other in 2014. No dice. "They told me I could give one tag back, but then I'd have to reapply for it again like everyone else in the years ahead," he says. "They made it clear there are no guarantees that I'd ever draw one of those tags again in this lifetime."

Sturgeon, 58, opted to keep both tags. Together with his friend Ken Hunt, he set out to scout the backcountry and anticipate where goats and sheep would likely be in the fall. He also consulted with FWP biologists Craig Fager and Gary Hammond to learn more about goat and sheep behavior.

In October, Sturgeon decided to pursue a goat first, knowing that deep snows could soon pile up and curtail access to the high-country animals. A few months earlier, he and his buddy had scouted Hogback Mountain in the Snowcrest Range, where they'd spotted several billies. Sturgeon knew that the only way to get close to the animals was to hire a guide and horses. He and his guide drove to a trailhead and rode 5 miles to a base camp, where they slept in tents. That first night, half a foot of snow fell.

Riding 10 miles on each of the first few days, Sturgeon and his guide didn't see a single goat. "We arrived thinking it would be easy," Sturgeon says. "But the goats I'd seen at the end of summer had moved." So the pair ventured deeper into the rocky crags until, finally, they were perched on a ridge line dividing two local landmarks called Little Devil's Hole and Big Devil's Hole.

"The snow-covered mountain was so steep and treacherous that we had to park the horses there and hoof it ourselves," Sturgeon says. After hours of scrambling across the rocky terrain and glassing, they finally spied a billy—a big one. The massive goat disappeared momentarily and emerged on the edge of a precipice near the timber line above the abyss of Big Devil's Hole. Stur-

geon estimated it was only 70 yards away.

The pastor fired twice, hitting the goat each time. The billy tumbled down the mountain toward the shadowy depths of Big Devil's Hole. It finally hung up—though just barely—on a scraggly juniper.

The hunter and guide slid on their bellies, feet first, down the steep scree slope to reach the goat. They were stunned by its size. The animal, which a biologist later estimated to be about seven and a half years old, had one horn protruding 9.75 inches and the other 9.5 inches, easily qualifying for the Boone and Crockett Club record books.

With daylight fast disappearing, the pair quickly field dressed the goat, intending to return the following morning to pack it out. The guide hightailed it ahead to fetch the horses, while Sturgeon took his time traversing the treacherous terrain.

With one errant step, Sturgeon slipped on a patch of ice and fell. Tumbling toward a jumble of jagged scree below, he extended his arms to cushion the blow. Upon impact, he heard a loud crack. The elbow on his left arm had broken—backwards.

"I looked down and my arm wasn't working. It was just kind of dangling there. As I looked around in pitch-black darkness, I had the sensation of being in a dream, asking myself, 'Lord, what am I doing here?'"

It's a question, he says today with a laugh,

“I told the doctor that, fortunately, it was my left arm that was injured because I shoot with my right.”

that the subjects in his Sunday sermons often ask themselves.

With no other option, Sturgeon kept descending for 2 miles in the darkness. Back at camp, all he could find was aspirin to keep the pain at bay. He spent a long and uncomfortable night trying to sleep in the tent. At sunup the guide headed out to retrieve the goat, then he and Sturgeon rode 5 miles back to the trailhead, the pastor's broken elbow jarring each time his horse took a step.

Doctors in Dillon confirmed that Sturgeon's arm was badly broken and referred him to an orthopedic specialist in Missoula. In the operating room, the surgeon inserted two screws to put the joint back together. Then he wrapped Sturgeon's limb in a cast extending from armpit to wrist.

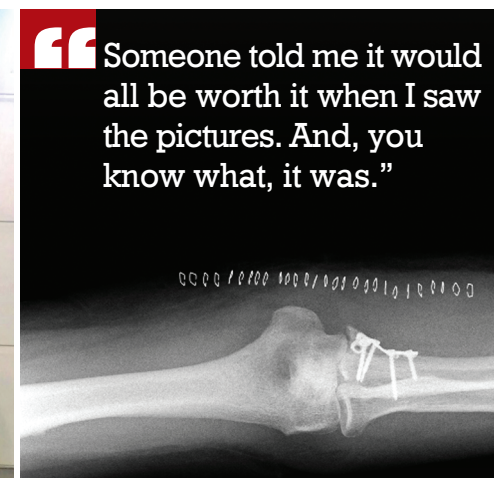
When the physician told him he needed to take it easy, Sturgeon said that wouldn't be possible because he still had a sheep tag to fill. "I can sometimes be kind of stubborn," he says. "I told the doctor that, fortunately, it was my left arm that was injured because I shoot with my right."

For another ten days, Sturgeon continued

his quest for a sheep, often driving along bumpy backcountry roads with his cast-covered arm encased in pillows. Finally, the quarry cooperated. With his daughter, Rachel, and his friend Ken with him, Sturgeon hunted Muddy Creek in the Tendoy Mountains. The group quickly found several rams. Sturgeon crept to within 200 yards and dropped a big one with his 7mm Remington mag firing a 150-grain bullet, the same load he used to kill his goat.

The sheep's horn measured 15 inches around the base and 40 inches from base to tip—just shy of a Boone and Crockett record. "Both animals are huge," Sturgeon says, noting that he had the heads mounted and shared the meat with his parishioners.

Unfortunately, the arm pain refused to go away. So Sturgeon returned to the hospital where doctors discovered that the joint was not healing. A surgeon put in four additional screws as well as a titanium plate. "Someone at the time told me it would all be worth it when I saw the pictures. And, you know what, it was," says the pastor. "I'm one of the happiest hunters in Montana." 🐾



HOLY MOLY! Pastor Steve Sturgeon of Dillon with his near-trophy bighorn ram and Boone and Crockett mountain goat, both shot in 2013. Center: An X-ray of Sturgeon's broken elbow showing screws and stitches.

